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## MARX'S "ECONOMIC DETERMINISM" IN THE LIGHT OF MODERN PSYCHOLOGY\*

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Is Karl Marx the Darwin of sociology? The claim that he must be so considered has been vigorously put forward in recent years by a number of socialist writers,<sup>1</sup> but strangely enough has thus far been largely ignored by the sociologists. The claim is that Marx did for social evolution with his "materialistic conception of history" what Darwin did for organic evolution with his theory of natural selection; namely, that he revealed the essential method or mechanism of the evolutionary process in human society.<sup>2</sup> Moreover many economists who are anti-socialists oddly enough accept Marx's formula as an adequate theory of social evolution. Much has been written in criticism of Marx's theory and of Marxian socialism, but an adequate sociological and psychological criticism of his "materialistic conception of history," the doctrine which is fundamental to his whole social philosophy, is still strangely lacking.<sup>3</sup> It is the purpose of this paper to indicate some of the bearings of modern psychology and sociology upon this doctrine, and to what extent it may be accepted by the student of society.

It is not easy to criticize Marx's theory of social evolution upon the basis of the results of scientific psychology, for it is difficult to discover exactly what Marx's theory really was.

\* While this paper deals specifically with Marx's "economic determinism," it is equally directed against any other exclusively or preponderatingly economic interpretation of history or society.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Ferri's *Socialism and Modern Science*, 88, 95, 160, 163.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ferri's statement: "This law is truly the most scientific and the most prolific sociological theory that has ever been discovered by the genius of man."—*Op. cit.*, 163.

<sup>3</sup> Professor Seligman's admirable little book on *The Economic Interpretation of History* does not, of course, attempt a definite psychological criticism of the theory; the same is true of practically all other critical studies of Marx's theory. However, Dr. M. M. Davis in his *Psychological Interpretations of Society* (chap. xiii) offers a psychological criticism which, though worded differently, is very similar to the one given in this paper.

Some of his latest apologists present his "materialistic conception of history" in such a modified form that scarcely any student of society would object to it.<sup>4</sup> An examination, however, of the writings of Marx, Engels, and the older Marxians shows quite conclusively that these thinkers held in general to what may properly be called a theory of "economic determinism" in social evolution.<sup>5</sup> Marx himself asserted in his *Critique de l'économie politique* that "the method of production of the material life determines the social, political, and spiritual life process in general." Moreover, it is noteworthy that Marx and his collaborators usually make use of the phrase "the methods of production and distribution" rather than of the word "economic," so that it cannot be claimed that their doctrine results from the ambiguity of the word "economic."<sup>6</sup> They were evidently speaking of the economic in the narrow and exact sense. Quite rightly, therefore, Professor Ferri, who must be regarded as one of the most distinguished exponents of Marxian socialism, unhesitatingly speaks of Marx's theory as one of "economic determinism." Professor Ferri sums up Marx's theory with great accuracy in the following words: "The economic phenomena form the foundation and determine the conditions of all other human or social manifestations, and consequently ethics, law, and politics are only derivative phenomena determined by the economic factor in accordance with the conditions of each particular people in every phase of history and under all climatic conditions."<sup>7</sup> Professor Ferri would modify this formula only to this extent that "the moral, juridical, and political institutions from effects become causes and react in their

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Spargo's statement of the theory in the *American Journal of Sociology* for July, 1910 (XVI, 27). However, in *Karl Marx, His Life and Work*, Spargo accepts the statement of theory given by Engels.

<sup>5</sup> That both Marx and Engels qualified considerably their statement of the theory in their later years is only an indication that they felt the force of criticism. Some of these qualifications appear quite inconsistent with the general trend of their social philosophy (cf. Engels' letter to the *Sozialistischer Akademiker*, quoted by Seligman and Bernstein).

<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that recent socialist writers usually make use of the same phrase; for example, Mr. W. J. Ghent states the theory as follows: "The superstructure of society in all times, with all of its institutions, its codes of morals and of laws, is a reflex of the prevailing system of production and distribution."

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, 160.

turn, although with less efficacy on the economic conditions."<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, however, Ferri agrees with Marx that all of these other social phenomena must be a resultant of the economic forces. Accordingly Ferri says the physical determinism of such thinkers as Buckle and the anthropological determinism of the ethnologists must issue in the "economic determinism" of Marx.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Marx's whole social philosophy necessarily presupposes that the economic is fundamentally determinative of all other social phenomena. Marxian socialism has always held that a revolution in the economic life of society would mean an equal revolution in all other phases of the social life. The Marxian socialist philosophy, in a nutshell, has always been: "Economic conditions are wrong, consequently other social conditions are wrong; make economic conditions right, and all other social conditions will be right too." The reality of other aspects of the social life than the economic was, of course, not denied by Marx, nor even was the presence of other factors in social evolution disregarded. The point is, however, that with Marx and the Marxians generally these other forces are what we might call epi-phenomena of the economic process, not being themselves in any way fundamental, or in the long run determinative of the social life.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, if this were not the case there would be no sense in attempting a criticism of the "materialistic conception of history," because this theory would be in no way distinct from other conceptions. The theory becomes a distinct theory of social evolution only when it is asserted that the economic factors in the social life (methods of production, distribution,

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, 162.

<sup>9</sup> The theory in Marx's mind was unquestionably simply a corollary of his general philosophical materialism. If viewed in this light, it is open to all of the criticisms which apply to philosophical materialism. For a brief criticism of the theory from this point of view, see Bernstein's *Evolutionary Socialism*, 6 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Labriola's statement that the theory attempts "only to explain in the *last analysis* all the historic facts by means of the underlying economic structure" (*Essays on Materialistic Conception of History*, 111); also Ferri's statement noted above, and Engels' quoted by Seligman (*op. cit.*, 143). For typical socialist applications of the theory see Lewis' *Vital Problems in Social Evolution*, chap. i, or Rappaport's *Looking Forward: A Treatise on the Status of Woman and on the Origin of the Family and the State*.

and exchange) either determine the whole course of social evolution or condition it in such a way that all other social factors are mediated and their expression ultimately determined by the economic factors.<sup>11</sup> There can be no doubt, then, that Marx's theory of social evolution, upon which his followers rest his claim to be considered the Darwin of sociology, is that the biological and psychological factors in human social life are all mediated and ultimately determined in their expression by economic processes. The theory is, therefore, in spite of the objections of recent apologists of Marx to the term, essentially a theory of "economic determinism."<sup>12</sup> According to this theory the economic interpretation of history, or of social evolution, is the all-sufficient interpretation; and if this is true sociologists should certainly make haste to hail Marx as the Darwin of their science.<sup>13</sup> It is this theory which we propose to examine in the light of modern psychology.

The conception of individual life which modern psychology necessitates is that of an organism responding, now this way, now that, to the various stimuli in the environment. The stimuli do not compel activity, but are rather the opportunities for the discharge of energy, the organism itself being self-active and a relatively independent center of energy. Various classes of stimuli, then, impinge upon the organism and stimulate its activity. The character of the response depends upon the hereditary equipment and "acquired characters" of the organism; in other words the instincts, or native impulses, and the acquired habits of the individual determine very largely the

<sup>11</sup> As Labriola and Ferri agree in stating it. To say that economic factors are the *main* or *principal* factors is in no way to offer a distinct theory of social evolution; for it leaves the question of other factors and the exact part which they play quite undetermined.

<sup>12</sup> The objection that "economic determinism" as a term suggests "economic fatalism," while valid from a popular point of view, is not valid from a scientific point of view, since "determinism" in scientific usage is not necessarily that of mechanical causes, but may be psychological. As we have just seen, the essence of the theory is that all of the biological and psychological forces of the social life are mediated (controlled) by the economic process. The determinism implied is psychological; hence only a psychological criticism is adequate.

<sup>13</sup> The claim constantly put forth by Marx's followers that Marxian socialism is "a theory of social evolution," is certainly a challenge to sociology. Either sociologists should accept Marx's theory and stop trying to construct independent theories of social evolution, or they should give good reasons for rejecting it.

character of the responses, the response of the organism to one class of stimuli affecting its response to other classes of stimuli only as it affects the total habits of the organism.<sup>14</sup> Whenever, of course, instinctive and habitual responses do not work well, result in faulty adaptations of the organism to its environment, intelligence comes in to reconstruct the activity, that is, to build up new habits. It is evident from this most brief account of the nature of individual activity that the type of response to one set of stimuli does not determine in any fundamental way the type of response to another set of stimuli. However, habits of response to a certain class of stimuli do affect to a certain extent habits of response to all other classes, because individual activity must preserve unity if the life process is to be successfully carried on. If the type of response to one set of stimuli changes, then the habits of response to all other classes of stimuli must change with it, because a new situation has been created to which the organism must adjust itself as a unity. This is, however, simply the doctrine of the unity of personality which modern psychological research has tended to confirm; but this doctrine in no way necessitates the belief that habits of response to one particular set of stimuli (namely the economic) are peculiarly determinative of habits of response to other classes. It is rather a doctrine of the reciprocity and interdependence of all individual activities.

Likewise modern psychology necessitates the conception of human society as a complex of living organisms responding, now this way, now that, to external stimuli in the environment. These stimuli are roughly, but inaccurately, often spoken of as social causes, though they are not causes in a mechanical sense. Just as responses to stimuli given by individuals vary greatly, according to the inner nature of the individual organism, so the responses given by groups of individuals vary according to the hereditary tendencies and habits of the organisms composing the social group. Now these stimuli in the environment which give rise to the activities of society as of individu-

<sup>14</sup> See Angell's *Psychology*, especially chap. iii; also Thorndike's *Elements of Psychology*, Part II.

als may, of course, by a process of abstraction, be classified into several great groups such as the economic, the reproductive, the political, the religious, and so on. The economic stimuli we may roughly define as those which have to do with the processes of the production and distribution of wealth, that is, the economic stimuli are those which are concerned with economic value. Now there is no reason why the responses of a social group to these economic stimuli, those connected with economic value, should determine the responses to all other stimuli, that is, should determine all other social activities. Modern psychology leaves, in other words, Marx's supposition that the other activities of the social life are determined by the economic, or are simply reflexes of economic processes, without any scientific foundation. It is true that habits of response in the social group to a certain class of stimuli affect to a certain extent habits of response to all other classes. Thus it follows that the economic phase of human social life affects to a very great degree all other phases. This is simply a consequence of the unity of individual personality and of the interdependence of all phases of the social life, that is, of the unity of society. But this is something very different from Marx's theory that the economic element determines all other phases, or conditions them in such a way that their form and expression are fixed. For under the doctrine of social interdependence it is just as reasonable to say that the religious and intellectual phases of the social life, for example, determine the economic, as it is to say that the method of producing and distributing wealth determines the political, the moral, the religious, and other phases of social life.

It is evident that the fallacy in the reasoning of Marx and of those who uphold the "materialistic conception of history" is due to the overabstraction of the economic from all other phases of the social life process. In order to understand that process the geographical, the racial, the political, the religious, the educational, and all other factors must be taken into account as well as the economic. In other words, *the social life cannot be interpreted in terms of any one of its phases or in*

terms of a single set of causes, but can only be properly interpreted by a synthetic view which shall take into account all the different factors actually found in the social life process. Such a synthetic view can best be obtained, not through taking some specialized phase of human society, such as the method of producing and distributing wealth, but rather through paying attention to the original biological and psychological elements in the social life process. A fundamental interpretation of social evolution is not to be secured, therefore, through economic, nor through political or religious elements, but rather *through the original biological and psychological factors*. Now the economic in any proper sense of the term can scarcely be said to exist below the human level,<sup>15</sup> at least we have no knowledge of economic value emerging in animal society; consequently the problem of social evolution is fundamentally a biological and psychological problem, that is, a sociological one.

The soundness of this position is emphasized by what is perhaps the greatest discovery in modern social psychology, namely the rôle of imitation in the social life. Tarde and others have shown that on account of the fundamental imitative tendencies of man, examples of social activity and institutions tend to be copied almost regardless of economic conditions in society.<sup>16</sup> It is true that where economic conditions are favorable to the imitation of an activity, imitation takes place much more rapidly; but there are many examples of imitation taking place relatively regardless of the favorableness or unfavorableness of economic conditions. If Marx and the economic interpreters of history in general were fully to allow for this factor of imitation what we already know regarding its workings, the "materialistic conception of history" would have to be so stretched

<sup>15</sup> The statement of Professor Keasbey (translator's Preface to Loria's *Economic Foundations of Society*, viii) that "economic necessity determined the original forms of social life" can only mean "the necessities of nutrition and reproduction, etc." But this use of the word "economic" in the sense of "biological" is a wholly unwarranted extension of the term. See my article on "The Origin of Society" in *American Journal of Sociology*, XV, 394.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, chaps. v-vii; also Ross, *Social Psychology*, chaps. viii-xiv. Tarde would apparently concede only a comparatively small determining influence to the purely economic factors in society. Rather he would make economic factors themselves merely modes of social imitation.



and modified that there would be little of value left in it for the sociologist. It is the same way with other psychological factors, such as native reactions like sympathy<sup>17</sup> and pugnacity. Indeed when one surveys the course of human social evolution from the standpoint of psychology one can only feel that such a doctrine as the "materialistic conception of history" is the offspring of psychological ignorance; but for such psychological ignorance Marx and his followers should, of course, not be blamed, as the development of modern psychology, and of social psychology in particular, has been wholly since Marx formulated his famous theory. Marx's doctrine is simply one of the many gropings for a scientific conception of social evolution which speculative thought showed previous to the development of modern science.

Neither can "economic determinism" stand in the somewhat revised and modified form in which we frequently find it among the various socialist and economic writers of today; namely, that one's economic occupation, one's method of obtaining a livelihood, determines his habits of thinking and acting, and so determines the activities of the mass of individuals composing a social group. At first sight this hypothesis, that occupation determines habits of thought and acting, seems quite in accord with modern psychology; but it has two fallacies in it. It is only when the word occupation is used in such a broad sense as to mean life itself that it can safely be said that occupation determines habits of thought. On the contrary it is notorious that one's method of passing one's leisure does more to determine character, frequently, than one's method of earning a livelihood; and this is true not only of the so-called leisure classes, but also of the working classes to an almost equal degree. Their amusements and recreations (which in early youth take up more than half of their total time) determine their habits of thought quite as much as their occupations. Moreover, the word occupation stands only for activities within the lifetime of the individual, while habits of thought are also largely determined by instinctive tendencies and impulses which

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Giddings, *Elements of Sociology*, chaps. v-xiii.

the individual has received by heredity from the life of the past. The determinism of social activities through prevailing economic occupations of individuals as a sociological hypothesis, therefore, falls to the ground.

As for inductive evidence supporting the "materialistic conception of history" there is none which will stand the test of severe scientific scrutiny. Of the many fields from which the sociologist draws his facts ethnography is certainly one of the most important, but ethnography affords no proof of the contention that other elements of culture vary invariably with the economic element. On the contrary, ethnography affords many examples of the opposite. The Tungus people of eastern Siberia may be cited as one example. While the methods of earning a livelihood among the Tunguses vary all the way from simple hunting and fishing up to the lower forms of agriculture, yet all observers testify as to the remarkable uniformity in character, in religion, and in other elements of culture among these different Tungus groups, apparently regardless of the different methods of production. Everywhere the true Tungus of Siberia is the same gentle, peace-loving, truth-telling, Shaman-worshipping type, no matter what his economic development may be. With each type of economy there does not go a corresponding type of Tungusic character and culture, as should be the case if the economic conception of the social life were true. Many other examples of cases where the economic element varies relatively independently of other culture elements and vice versa might be given. The field of ethnography offers no adequate evidence to support the "materialist conception of history."

History itself, it may safely be affirmed, offers no such evidence. The history of China for the past three thousand years has illustrated, not so much the preponderating influence of economic conditions, as the preponderating influence of ancestor worship. All students of Chinese history agree that this religion, whatever its origin, has been the "master key" to Chinese social life and character. The history of Israel can scarcely even be understood from the economic standpoint, and especially is it impossible to explain the religious development of the Hebrews

upon an economic basis. The older view that the history of Israel is best approached from the standpoint of religion still stands unshaken, although, of course, the religious element in Hebrew history must be explained by the psychological characteristics of the ancient Jew. Moreover the great extension of Hebrew religion over the civilized world in the form of Christianity has not been satisfactorily explained, in spite of the efforts of Kautsky and others, from the standpoint of historical materialism. While the spread of Christianity seems to have been limited by certain racial lines, there is little or no evidence to show that economic conditions were fundamentally determinative of its spread over western Europe, and of its failure in Africa, Arabia, Persia, India, and China. The spread of Christianity, and even of the essential elements of western civilization, have illustrated more plainly the power of imitation in human society than they have illustrated the controlling influence of economic conditions.

The problems of present society no more support any theory of economic determinism than do the facts of history and ethnography.<sup>18</sup> Take the problem of crime for example. The prolonged scientific study of crime by anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists has resulted in practically unanimous agreement that crime in society has three distinct roots:<sup>19</sup> first, in the biological makeup of the individual, especially in a degenerate heredity, the causes of which, while not thoroughly understood, are undoubtedly more or less independent of economic conditions; secondly, in the early acquired habits of the individual which more or less determine his psychical adjustment to society; such habits being the result of early training and imitation are largely independent of the economic organization of society; thirdly, in faulty social conditions, chiefly economic perhaps, which depress the normal individual into the

<sup>18</sup> My *Sociology and Modern Social Problems* presents a step-by-step refutation of the idea that present social problems can be interpreted in terms of one set of causes (e.g., the economic).

<sup>19</sup> Ferri himself acknowledges that historical materialism but illy accords with his own theory of crime. He attempts to reconcile the two by claiming that all degenerate variation in heredity is due to past bad economic conditions—a view unsupported by modern biology.

abnormal classes. In other words, crime can be gotten rid of only by controlling physical heredity and moral training as well as social organization. The large biological and psychological elements in such a social phenomenon as crime show very plainly that the purely economic element plays a much less important part in determining the social life than Marx supposed.

The true place of the economic element in the social life must now be apparent. Like the physical environment it is not so much a rigidly determining element as a stimulus to development in certain directions. Like the physical environment, too, economic stages present platforms upon which a wide variety of social and historical development is possible. The economic element limits, to be sure, the possibilities of other social development, but it is only one of many limiting factors, and is not a sufficiently rigidly determining element to justify a preponderatingly economic interpretation of the social life.

There is, therefore, no scientific warrant for an "economic interpretation of history" except as that interpretation is but a phase of a larger interpretation which will make due allowance for other factors in social evolution. The historical process is not fundamentally an economic process, but is rather a socio-psychological, that is, a sociological process. The economic interpretation of that process may throw a useful sidelight upon social evolution, but it can never offer an adequate theory of society, because it is attempting to interpret the whole in terms of what is merely a part.

As for the practical consequences to the socialist party of the giving up of the materialistic conception of history as an adequate theory of social evolution, it would seem that thereby the socialist party would simply free itself from a needless incubus.<sup>20</sup> As long as socialism remains purely and simply an economic movement it will fail to enlist the enthusiasm of the best minds. The salvation of socialism depends upon its be-

<sup>20</sup> If the materialistic conception of history is "the central and fundamental proposition of socialism," as many socialists claim (see, e.g., the translator's Preface to Labriola's *Essays*), then socialism, of course, will have to stand or fall with that doctrine.

coming a general program of social reform along all lines and not simply a program for industrial revolution. The "revisionists" section of the socialist party, it would seem, in refusing to emphasize Marx's theoretical vagaries, are taking the only course which offers a reasonable chance of saving the party from destruction.